

REVISIION EDITION

# IMAGINING AMERICA

## STORIES FROM THE PROMISED LAND

EDITED BY WESLEY BROWN & AMY LING



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trying to come between his mother and another beating—or worse. Are you listening?”

“Pardon?”

“I didn’t think so . . . Look, better Boys’ Town than some God-forsaken reservation . . . where he would drown in whiskey or die from TB.”

“I understand what you are saying. But . . .”

“His mother wouldn’t talk. He wouldn’t talk—even if he knew who his people were. Even if all the Indians had mailing addresses and I had all the time in the world . . . I don’t know. Maybe his mother didn’t talk because she thought I was doing what was best for him.”

The younger woman withdraws further into silence, waiting now only for the end of the story, the end of the line.

“I don’t know how much he understood of what I told him. Most of the time he seemed to be sleeping. Or I could hear him crying. Most of the time I talked—or sang. What a pair, eh?”

She will not relinquish her reminiscence, the flavor of it, the goodness of it. And what did you get out of it? Adventure? Righteousness?

The younger woman thinks she sees the boy clearly. The tracks of children running from the Christian boarding schools, feet frozen in the snow. She’s not a historian for nothing.

She asks the inevitable question: “Whatever happened to him?”

“I don’t know. I never saw him after I left him at Boys’ Town. But the police never found out where he was, either. That was good. I mean, that was the point of the whole journey. A safe place.”

“What about . . . ?” The younger woman is caught up again.

“The mother? She wasn’t so lucky. She went to prison for life, Manslaughter.”

“Didn’t she try to get away? I mean why didn’t she run?”

“And where would she go? A woman like that—traveling alone?”

“Maybe she was heartbroken.”

They reached the voting booths, having traveled the last few yards in silence.

1990

## A DRUG CALLED TRADITION



*Sherman Alexie*

“Goddamn it, Thomas,” Junior yelled. “How come your fridge is always fucking empty?”

Thomas walked over to the refrigerator, saw it was empty, and then sat down inside.

“There,” Thomas said. “It ain’t empty no more.”

Everybody in the kitchen laughed their asses off. It was the second-largest party in reservation history and Thomas Builds-the-Fire was the host. He was the host because he was the one buying all the beer. And he was buying all the beer because he had just got a ton of money from Washington Water Power. And he just got a ton of money from Washington Water Power because they had to pay for the lease to have ten power poles running across some land that Thomas had inherited.

When Indians make lots of money from corporations that way, we can all hear our ancestors laughing in the trees. But we never can tell whether they’re laughing at the Indians or the whites. I think they’re laughing at pretty much everybody.

“Hey, Victor,” Junior said. “I hear you got some magic mushrooms.”

“No way,” I said. “Just Green Giant mushrooms. I’m making salad later.”

But I did have this brand new drug and had planned on inviting Junior along. Maybe a couple Indian princesses, too. But only if they were full-blood. Well, maybe if they were at least half-Spokane.

“Listen,” I whispered to Junior to keep it secret. “I’ve got some good stuff, a new drug, but just enough for me and you and maybe a couple others. Keep it under your warbonnet.”

"Cool," Junior said. "I've got my new car outside. Let's go."

We ditched the party, decided to save the new drug for ourselves, and jumped into Junior's Camaro. The engine was completely shot but the exterior was good. You see, the car looked mean. Mostly we just parked it in front of the Trading Post and tried to look like horsepower warriors. Driving it was a whole other matter, though. It belched and farted its way down the road like an old man. That definitely wasn't cool.

"Where do you want to go?" Junior asked.

"Benjamin Lake," I said, and we took off in a cloud of oil and exhaust. We drove down the road a little toward Benjamin Lake when we saw Thomas Builds-the-Fire standing by the side of the road. Junior stopped the car and I leaned out the window.

"Hey, Thomas," I asked. "Shouldn't you be at your own party?"

"You guys know it ain't my party anyway," Thomas said. "I just paid for it."

We laughed. I looked at Junior and he nodded his head.

"Hey," I said. "Jump in with us. We're going out to Benjamin Lake to do this new drug I got. It'll be very fucking Indian. Spiritual shit, you know?"

Thomas climbed in back and was just about ready to tell another one of his goddamn stories when I stopped him.

"Now, listen," I said. "You can only come with us if you don't tell any of your stories until after you've taken the drug."

Thomas thought that over awhile. He nodded his head in the affirmative and we drove on. He looked so happy to be spending the time with us that I gave him the new drug.

"Eat up, Thomas," I said. "The party's on me now."

Thomas downed it and smiled.

"Tell us what you see, Mr. Builds-the-Fire," Junior said.

Thomas looked around the car. Hell, he looked around our world and then poked his head through some hole in the wall into another world. A better world.

"Victor," Thomas said. "I can see you. God, you're beautiful. You've got braids and you're stealing a horse. Wait, no. It's not a horse. It's a cow."

Junior almost wrecked because he laughed so hard.

"Why the fuck would I be stealing a cow?" I asked.

"I'm just giving you shit," Thomas said. "No, really, you're stealing a horse and you're riding by moonlight. Van Gogh should've painted this one, Victor. Van Gogh should've painted you."

*It was a cold, cold night.* I had crawled through the brush for hours, moved by inches so the Others would not hear me. I wanted one of their ponies. I needed one of their ponies. I needed to be a hero and earn my name.

I crawl close enough to their camp to hear voices, to hear an old man sucking the last bit of meat off a bone. I can see the pony I want. He is black, twenty hands high. I can feel him shiver because he knows that I have come for him in the middle of the night.

Crawling more quickly now, I make my way to the corral, right between the legs of a young boy asleep on his feet. He was supposed to keep watch for men like me. I barely touch his bare leg and he swipes at it, thinking it is a mosquito. If I stood and kissed the young boy full on the mouth, he would only think he was dreaming of the girl who smiled at him earlier in the day.

When I finally come close to the beautiful black pony, I stand up straight and touch his nose, his mane.

*I have come for you,* I tell the horse, and he moves against me, knows it is true. I mount him and ride silently through the camp, right in front of a blind man who smells us pass by and thinks we are just a pleasant memory. When he finds out the next day who we really were, he will remain haunted and crowded the rest of his life.

I am riding that pony across the open plain, in moonlight that makes everything a shadow.

*What's your name?* I ask the horse, and he rears back on his hind legs. He pulls air deep into his lungs and rises above the ground.

*Flight,* he tells me, *my name is Flight.*

"That's what I see," Thomas said. "I see you on that horse."

Junior looked at Thomas in the rearview mirror, looked at me, looked at the road in front of him.

"Victor," Junior said. "Give me some of that stuff."

"But you're driving," I said.

"That'll make it even better," he said, and I had to agree with him.

"Tell us what you see," Thomas said and leaned forward.

"Nothing yet," Junior said.

"Am I still on that horse?" I asked Thomas.

"Oh, yeah."

We came up on the turnoff to Benjamin Lake, and Junior made it into a screaming corner. Just another Indian boy engaged in some rough play.

"Oh, shit," Junior said. "I can see Thomas dancing."

"I don't dance," Thomas said.

"You're dancing and you ain't wearing nothing. You're dancing naked around a fire."

"No, I'm not."

"Shit, you're not. I can see you, you're tall and dark and fucking huge, cousin."

*They're all gone, my tribe is gone.* Those blankets they gave us, infected with smallpox, have killed us. I'm the last, the very last, and I'm sick, too. So very sick. Hot. My fever burning so hot.

I have to take off my clothes, feel the cold air, splash the water across my bare skin. And dance. I'll dance a Ghost Dance. I'll bring them back. Can you hear the drums? I can hear them, and it's my grandfather and my grandmother singing. Can you hear them?

I dance one step and my sister rises from the ash. I dance another and a buffalo crashes down from the sky onto a log cabin in Nebraska. With every step, an Indian rises. With every other step, a buffalo falls.

I'm growing, too. My blisters heal, my muscles stretch, expand. My tribe dances behind me. At first they are no bigger than children. Then they begin to grow, larger than me, larger than the trees around us. The buffalo come to join us and their hooves shake the earth, knock all the white people from their beds, send their plates crashing to the floor.

We dance in circles growing larger and larger until we are standing on the shore, watching all the ships returning to Europe. All the white hands are waving good-bye and we continue to dance, dance until the ships fall off the horizon, dance until we are so tall and strong that the sun is nearly jealous. *We dance that way.*

"Junior," I yelled. "Slow down, slow down."

Junior had the car spinning in circles, doing donuts across empty fields, coming too close to fences and lonely trees.

"Thomas," Junior yelled. "You're dancing, dancing hard."

I leaned over and slammed on the brakes. Junior jumped out of the car and ran across the field. I turned the car off and followed him. We'd gotten about a mile down the road toward Benjamin Lake when Thomas came driving by.

"Stop the car," I yelled, and Thomas did just that.

"Where were you going?" I asked him.

"I was chasing you and your horse, cousin."

"Jesus, this shit is powerful," I said and swallowed some. Instantly I saw and heard Junior singing. He stood on a stage in a ribbon shirt and blue jeans. With a guitar.

*Indians make the best cowboys.* I can tell you that. I've been singing at the Plantation since I was ten years old and have always drawn big crowds. All the white folks come to hear my songs, my little pieces of Indian wisdom, although they have to sit in the back of the theater because all the Indians get the best tickets for my shows. It's not racism. The Indians just camp out all night to buy tickets. Even the President of the United States, Mr. Edgar Crazy Horse himself, came to hear me once. I played a song I wrote for his great-grandfather, the famous Lakota warrior who helped us win the war against the whites:

*Crazy Horse, what have you done?  
Crazy Horse, what have you done?  
It took four hundred years  
and four hundred thousand guns  
but the Indians finally won.  
Ya-hey, the Indians finally won.*

*Crazy Horse, are you still singing?  
Crazy Horse, are you still singing?  
I honor your old songs  
and all they keep on bringing  
because the Indians keep winning.  
Ya-hey, the Indians keep winning.*

Believe me, I'm the best guitar player who ever lived. I can make my guitar sound like a drum. More than that, I can make any drum sound like a guitar. I can take a single hair from the braids of an Indian woman and make it sound like a promise come true. *Like a thousand promises come true.*

"Junior," I asked. "Where'd you learn to sing?"

"I don't know how to sing," he said.

We made our way down the road to Benjamin Lake and stood by the water and laughed softly. Junior sat on the hood of his car, and I danced around them both.

After a little bit, I tired out and sat on the hood of the car with Junior. The drug was beginning to wear off. All I could see in my vision of Junior was his guitar. Junior pulled out a can of warm Diet Pepsi and we passed it back and forth and watched Thomas talking to himself.

"He's telling himself stories," Junior said.

"Well," I said. "Ain't nobody else going to listen."

"Why's he like that?" Junior asked. "Why's he always talking about strange shit? Hell, he don't even need drugs."

"Some people say he got dropped on his head when he was little. Some of the old people think he's magic."

"What do you think?"

"I think he got dropped on his head and I think he's magic."

We laughed, and Thomas looked up from the water, from his stories, and smiled at us.

"Hey," he said. "You two want to hear a story?"

Junior and I looked at each other, looked back at Thomas, and decided that it would be all right. Thomas closed his eyes and told his story.

*It is now.* Three Indian boys are drinking Diet Pepsi and talking out by Benjamin Lake. They are wearing only loincloths and braids. Although it is the twentieth century and planes are passing overhead, the Indian boys have decided to be real Indians tonight.

They all want to have their vision, to receive their true names, their adult names. That is the problem with Indians these days. They have the same names all their lives. Indians wear their names like a pair of bad shoes.

So they decided to build a fire and breathe in that sweet smoke. They have not eaten for days so they know their visions should arrive soon. Maybe they'll see it in the flames or in the wood. Maybe the smoke will talk in Spokane or English. Maybe the cinders and ash will rise up.

The boys sit by the fire and breathe, their visions arrive. They are all carried away to the past, to the moment before any of them took their first drink of alcohol.

The boy Thomas throws the beer he is offered into the garbage. The boy Junior throws his whiskey through a window. The boy Victor spills his vodka down the drain.

Then the boys sing. They sing and dance and drum. They steal horses. I can see them. *They steal horses.*

\* \* \*

"You don't really believe that shit?" I asked Thomas.

"Don't need to believe anything. It just is."

Thomas stood up and walked away. He wouldn't even try to tell us any stories again for a few years. We had never been very good to him, even as boys, but he had always been kind to us. When he stopped even looking at me, I was hurt. How do you explain that?

Before he left for good, though, he turned back to Junior and me and yelled at us. I couldn't really understand what he was saying, but Junior swore he told us not to slow dance with our skeletons.

"What the hell does that mean?" I asked.

"I don't know," Junior said.

*There are things you should learn.* Your past is a skeleton walking one step behind you, and your future is a skeleton walking one step in front of you. Maybe you don't wear a watch, but your skeletons do, and they always know what time it is. Now, these skeletons are made of memories, dreams, and voices. And they can trap you in the in-between, between touching and becoming. But they're not necessarily evil, unless you let them be.

What you have to do is keep moving, keep moving, keep walking, in step with your skeletons. They ain't ever going to leave you, so you don't have to worry about that. Your past ain't going to fall behind, and your future won't get too far ahead. Sometimes, though, your skeletons will talk to you, tell you to sit down and take a rest, breathe a little. Maybe they'll make you promises, tell you all the things you want to hear.

Sometimes your skeletons will dress up as beautiful Indian women and ask you to slow dance. Sometimes your skeletons will dress up as your best friend and offer you a drink, one more for the road. Sometimes your skeletons will look exactly like your parents and offer you gifts.

But, no matter what they do, keep walking, keep moving. And don't wear a watch. Hell, Indians never need to wear a watch because your skeletons will always remind you about the time. See, it is always now. That's what Indian time is. The past, the future, all of it is wrapped up in the now. That's how it is. *We are trapped in the now.*

Junior and I sat out by Benjamin Lake until dawn. We heard voices now and again, saw lights in the trees. After I saw my grandmother walking

across the water toward me, I threw away the rest of my new drug and hid in the backseat of Junior's car.

Later that day we were parked in front of the Trading Post, gossiping and laughing, talking stories when Big Mom walked up to the car. Big Mom was the spiritual leader of the Spokane Tribe. She had so much good medicine I think she may have been the one who created the earth.

"I know what you saw," Big Mom said.

"We didn't see nothing," I said, but we all knew that I was lying.

Big Mom smiled at me, shook her head a little, and handed me a little drum. It looked like it was about a hundred years old, maybe older. It was so small it could fit in the palm of my hand.

"You keep that," she said. "Just in case."

"Just in case of what?" I asked.

"That's my pager. Just give it a tap and I'll be right over," she said and laughed as she walked away.

Now, I'll tell you that I haven't used the thing. In fact, Big Mom died a couple years back and I'm not sure she'd come even if the thing did work. But I keep it really close to me, like Big Mom said, just in case. I guess you could call it the only religion I have, one drum that can fit in my hand, but I think if I played it a little, it might fill up the whole world.

1993

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

SHERMAN ALEXIE is a Spokane / Coeur d'Alene Indian. He is the author of numerous books, including *The Toughest Indian in the World*, a national bestseller, and *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, which he adapted into a screenplay for the movie *Smoke Signals*.

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